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SUBJECT: MGLE01: S/CT COORDINATOR CRUMPTON HEARS STRAIGHT
TALK, GRIM PREDICTIONS FROM JUMBLATT, HAMADEH, MURR

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) Visiting S/CT Coordinator Crumpton had a long 5/22 conversation with Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias al-Murr, and Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh -- three men convinced they have been, or will be, targeted for assassination by the Syrian regime with Hizballah's help. The three suggested that the National Dialogue process, which includes Hizballah ostensibly as a purely Lebanese actor, might make incremental progress related to the Palestinian armed presence in Lebanon. However, Nasrallah's dogmatism about Hizballah's own arms was keeping their expectations for the National Dialogue low. They recognized the need for the "March 14" coalition to unify around a counter-argument to Nasrallah's case for Hizballah's arms. At the same time, they anticipated further attacks in Lebanon carried out by militant groups (other than Hizballah) tied to Syria and Iran. End summary.

DINNER WITH THREE MARKED MEN

¶2. (S) Druze leader Walid Jumblatt hosted visiting S/CT Coordinator Crumpton for a dinner on the evening of May 22. This first event on Ambassador Crumpton's schedule was notable for the fact that Jumblatt hosted it at his residence in Beirut's Clemenceau neighborhood. (Since the Hariri assassination in February 2005, concerns about his physical security have largely confined him to his castle-like ancestral home in the Chouf mountains, and he only rarely makes public appearances outside.)

¶3. (S) Besides the venue, the event was also notable for its Lebanese guests, who were limited to Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh and Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias al-Murr. Both Hamadeh and Murr narrowly survived assassination attempts, in October 2004 and July 2005, respectively. Both are convinced that the Syrian regime was behind the attacks, and that Hizballah played some sort of role in them.

¶4. (S) Compared to Jumblatt and Hamadeh, Murr is a more

recent member of the Lebanese sovereignty cause, having been literally blasted out of the pro-Syrian "loyalist" camp by the car bomb that was meant to take his life. Despite some continuing frictions with certain "March 14" figures, particularly Prime Minister Siniora, Murr has become close to Hamadeh, and the conversation and body language between him and Jumblatt, while more reserved, was friendly. Hamadeh told us privately that he was pleased that S/CT Crumpton's visit gave him the opportunity to bring Murr and Jumblatt closer together.

NATIONAL DIALOGUE: LOW EXPECTATIONS

15. (S) Jumblatt and his Lebanese guests expressed low expectations with the National Dialogue process, the next meeting of which is scheduled for June 8, with Hizballah's armed status figuring prominently on the agenda. Jumblatt recalled for Crumpton the uncompromising stance of Hizballah's Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, during the last National Dialogue meeting. Then, Nasrallah had insisted that there:

-- would be no talk of Hizballah disarmament before "liberation" of the Sheba'a Farms area;

-- could be no integration of Hizballah forces into the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF); and

-- must be no return to the state of affairs with Israel that previously existed under the 1949 armistice, which, Nasrallah claimed, provided no assurances of security for "the people of the South and Lebanon."

16. (S) Nasrallah had agreed with the "March 14" National Dialogue participants that Lebanon should "respect" international resolutions. However, he had added that

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"respecting" international resolutions did not equate to "abiding" by them, according to Jumblatt.

DEALING WITH THE PALESTINIAN ISSUE

17. (S) Murr mentioned that Nasrallah had recently advised him not to "dream" that the LAF would ever confiscate the weapons of Palestinian militias before the "whole region's problems were settled." Asked if Nasrallah would stand by the National Dialogue's unanimous decision in favor of ending an armed Palestinian presence outside the refugee camps within a 6-month period, Jumblatt said, "theoretically, yes -- practically, no."

18. (S) Hamadeh said that discussion related to the Palestinian presence was time-consuming and full of procedure, in part because Christian participants at the table were "anxious" about the Palestinian demand for the right to own property in Lebanon. Jumblatt said that this was nevertheless an issue on which "we could make some progress," providing for improved living conditions inside the Palestinian refugee camps in return for greater control over Palestinian arms outside the camps.

WHAT IS HIZBALLAH'S STRATEGY?

19. (S) Jumblatt and Hamadeh said they were struck by Nasrallah's advocacy within the National Dialogue for maintaining a continuous "balance of terror" with Israel, which Nasrallah had described as an existential threat. Nasrallah had held forth on how "the Katyusha," the primitive Soviet-designed multiple rocket-launcher that is a staple of Hizballah's arsenal, became "a weapon of mass destruction" when trained on certain Israeli targets (the petrochemical facilities around Haifa, for example). Strategic bombing of

Israel, Jumblatt pointed out, was something different entirely from Hizballah's historic strategy of guerilla warfare to end foreign occupation of Lebanese territory. (Comment: see reftel for a detailed account of Nasrallah's presentation.)

WHOSE SIDE IS HIZBALLAH ON?

¶10. (S) While the purpose of the National Dialogue was to allow all sides in Lebanon a forum to peacefully work out their differences over the critical issues facing the country, Jumblatt wondered whether Nasrallah had "a 'Lebanese side' to begin with." Hizballah's Lebanese identity was subject to debate because of "the theological issue," that is, the Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of "viloyat-e faqih," rule of the jurisprudent, which makes Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamene'i, Hizballah's supreme leader as well.

¶11. (S) The link between Hizballah's arms and regional conflicts beyond Lebanon meant that Hizballah was exposing Lebanon to potential destruction in the event of conflict between Iran and the United States, Jumblatt and his Lebanese guests agreed. At the opposite extreme -- at, curiously, at the same time -- Nasrallah appeared to be detaching the South of Lebanon, with its predominantly Shi'a population, from the rest of Lebanon. Jumblatt noted that Nasrallah repeatedly used the expression "the people of the South and Lebanon," as if he was referring to two distinct entities.

¶12. (S) On this note, Jumblatt and Hamadeh expressed concern about allegedly stepped-up Hizballah preparations in southern Lebanon and beyond. These included the installation of communications cables, presumably for greater information security. Hizballah was also reportedly buying large expanses of land from Druze owners in the Litani River valley and from Christians in the Jezzine pocket. The eventual goal, Jumblatt surmised, was to link the Israeli border areas with lands to the north, creating a Hizballah-controlled "buffer zone" between Syria and the rest of Lebanon.

RESPONDING TO HIZBALLAH

¶13. (S) Jumblatt and Hamadeh said that they were working on a "political response" to Nasrallah's argument that Hizballah must hold onto its weapons indefinitely. It would be part of

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an effort to formulate a unified "March 14" position. Jumblatt pointed out that "one (position) is better than several," which is what "March 14" has had until now. Beyond the National Dialogue process, Jumblatt and Hamadeh said that there was a need to counter Nasrallah's argument that (as Jumblatt put it), "because I have weapons, the South is prosperous." The "March 14" leadership needed to come up with an alternative vision for Lebanon that Nasrallah's audience found compelling.

¶14. (S) Jumblatt said that he and his "March 14" allies needed to organize a series of events that would respond to a Hizballah public-relations offensive expected to follow the 10-year anniversary of Israel's final withdrawal from southern Lebanon on May 23. A "March 14" counter-campaign could revolve around the one-year anniversary of the assassination of journalist Samir Kassir, and also commemorate the death of the LAF soldier who later died of wounds sustained in a recent clash with Fatah-Intifadah militiamen in the Biqa'a Valley.

ANY ALTERNATIVE TO HIZBALLAH?

¶15. (S) Asked whether Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri's Amal Movement would continue to follow Hizballah's lead, effectively giving Hizballah a monopoly over political

representation of the Shi'a community, Jumblatt and Hamadeh said that Berri was "squeezed." While Berri, who reflects "another mood of the Shi'a establishment," was personally inclined to strike off on his own path, he was constrained by the force of popular, Hizballah-generated sentiment in his community.

¶16. (S) Berri had "hinted" to Jumblatt that he might assert his independence from Hizballah in the event of a favorable resolution of the Sheba'a Farms, and Hamadeh thought it significant that Berri had recently paid a highly public visit on Sheikh Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, the most senior exponent in Lebanon of the center of Shi'a religious learning in Najaf (as opposed to Qom, with its historical connection to the Islamic revolutionary regime in Tehran, and through it to Hizballah).

¶17. (S) In the end, however, Jumblatt did not expect Berri to do so short of a change in the "balance of power" in the region. This could come in the form of a "change of behavior" on the part of what Jumblatt preferred to call "the Alawite regime" in Damascus, as well as "containment" of Iran. Pressure on the SARG, Hamadeh added, offered the potential of cutting "a major logistical supply route" to Hizballah. The next report of the UN International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIIC) could potentially be the "basic weapon of mass destruction" against SARG-orchestrated terrorism, Jumblatt suggested.

¶18. (S) Otherwise, Berri would remain Hizballah's "captive," said Jumblatt. "You can feel it at the Foreign Ministry," where Fawzi Salloukh, a member of the Shi'a elite who is much more on Berri's ideological wavelength than Hizballah's, seems to realize that his tenure in office is at the pleasure of Hassan Nasrallah, not that of Prime Minister Siniora or Speaker Berri. (Comment: This prescient remark foreshadowed a hostile reception the next morning, seemingly scripted for Hizballah consumption, given to Ambassadors Crumpton and Feltman by Salloukh, reported septel. End comment.)

¶19. (S) Murr added grimly that there was "no chance" of weakening Hizballah by any domestic means. Other potential Shi'a leaders had been "taken hostage," and this situation would not change for at least another two years.

DEALING WITH SYRIA AND IRAN

¶20. (S) Expanding on this, Hamadeh urged that U.S. policy seek to "disconnect the Eastern Mediterranean from Iran." This would have the effect of cutting Hizballah's logistical supply lines, helping to pacify northern and central Iraq, giving "the Syrian people a chance," and stopping the ongoing destabilization of Lebanon.

¶21. (S) It was doubtful, Hamadeh continued, that President Asad's regime could ever be "domesticated." He and Jumblatt suggested that the USG take a careful look at alternatives to

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Asad's regime, even ones that included the Muslim Brotherhood as a component. A "national unity government" in Syria was more feasible in Syria than it was in Iraq, Hamadeh asserted.

A more representative regime in Syria, with its Sunni-majority population, would "give hope" to Sunni Muslims and make militant Islam less attractive to them, he added.

¶22. (S) Jumblatt said that all indications were that the SARG viewed "March 14," and the Siniora government that it supported, as a "coup d'etat against it." The SARG was therefore determined to do anything to destroy them, Jumblatt said, to Hamadeh and Murr's nodding in ascent.

HIZBALLAH'S "KILLING PROBLEM"

¶23. (S) There was "no solution" for Hizballah in the near

term, Murr said. The only realistic goal was to put an end to Hizballah's apparently Syrian-directed "killing problem." According to Murr, Imad Mughaniyeh was currently "very active" in Beirut, working with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on the one hand and Syrian intelligence supremo (and President Asad's brother-in-law) Asef Shawkat on the other. "If we don't with Syria and Iran, there is no solution for Hizballah," Murr said.

WARNING OF MORE ATTACKS TO COME

¶24. (S) Murr predicted that the coming months would see further assassinations, more activity on the part of Syrian-aligned Palestinian rejectionists, and more visibility of al-Qa'ida-like (but Syrian-manipulated) Sunni militants. All of this was a matter of "Syrian manipulation with Iranian benediction," and it was geared towards forcing the United States and other countries to shift course in Lebanon, Murr said.

¶25. (S) Ironically, Syria's withdrawal of its military forces and overt intelligence personnel had made things more complicated, according to Murr. Syria continued to have an "army" of sorts in Lebanon, but one that carried "Lebanese identification" (that is, Hizballah and Syria's other remaining allies in Lebanon). It made for a "very dangerous" situation in the coming months, one in which international interests could find themselves targeted as well, both inside and outside Lebanon.

¶26. (S) As a sign of things to come, Murr pointed to what he portrayed as escalated militant activity in the Palestinian refugee camps. Allegedly from May to June of 2005, 900 would-be suicide bombers had been sent for "training" in a number of camps, including the large Ayn al-Hilweh camp near Sidon. Murr alleged that Hizballah was providing at least some of this training. It was the only example, he said, of Shi'a militants training Sunni militants.

¶27. (S) Murr said that Nasrallah told him once that Sunni militants had been behind the attack on his, Murr's, life. With a degree of candor about Syria that Nasrallah does not show in public, Nasrallah had added that he could not assure Murr that the SARG had not somehow been behind those Sunni militants, however. In private, Nasrallah normally "gives you a straight answer," Jumblatt added.

THE "ANJAR GROUP" AS AN EXAMPLE

¶28. (S) Murr referred to the so-called "Anjar group" of Sunni militants, which was supporting the foreign-fighter pipeline to Iraq and allegedly plotting attacks on foreign interests in Lebanon before being broken up by the Lebanese authorities, under Murr as then-Interior Minister, in September 2004. In the course of investigating the "Anjar group," Murr claimed, Lebanese authorities under his supervision had discovered links between them and nine terrorist cells active in Europe. This was a surprising discovery, according to Murr, because the "Anjar group" had been "fully handled by Hizballah," which provided training, and by Syrian military intelligence, which provided financing and protection.

IRGC PLANNING SNIPER ATTACKS?

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¶29. (S) Murr went on to claim that there were 500 "professionals" of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Lebanon. They occasionally use the Iranian Embassy in Lebanon as a base for preparations, as they did Hizballah-controlled areas of Lebanon. He said he had recently seen a report that Mughaniyeh, together with the

IRGC was involved in preparing sniper attacks in Lebanon, an alternate modus operandi to suicide bomb attacks.

PFLP-GC TOO MUCH FOR LEBANESE ARMY TO HANDLE?

130. (S) Jumblatt mentioned the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), whose base near the coastal town of Na'ameh, in his view, is too formidable to be dealt with by military means. Besides the PFLP-GC presence there, there were hundreds of Syrian "workers" in the area. If only half could be mobilized to fight an attack on Na'ameh, the LAF would not be able to cope. Murr described Na'ameh as a particularly dangerous terrorist arsenal, one out of the reach of the Lebanese authorities, a place where "you could keep 300 trucks on standby, ready to use" in car-bomb operations in Beirut and elsewhere. The PFLP-GC was linked to Syria by way of Hizballah, he said.

WHY NO ATTACKS RECENTLY?

131. (S) Asked why there had been no attacks recently (since the December 2005 assassination of MP Gebran Tueni), Murr suggested two reasons:

-- the SARG is cautiously waiting for the results of the next UNIIIC report, due in June; and

-- Saudi King Abdullah had been "very clear" in his most recent meeting with President Asad, telling him, in Murr's words, "if you want us to protect your regime, stop the killing in Lebanon." King Abdullah had made this point twice to Asad in their last meeting, according to Murr. (Jumblatt said he had heard the same account of this meeting from Egyptian President Mubarak and Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman.)

LEBANESE AUTHORITIES ARE CONSTRAINED

132. (S) Jumblatt and his Lebanese guests had little confidence in the ability of the Lebanese government to deal with this "killing problem." Hamadeh pointed out that the investigation of the attempt to assassinate him had revealed nothing so far. When Murr had tried to launch an investigation immediately after the attack, Hamadeh noted, what files there were disappeared "within hours." Murr grimly predicted that "we will never catch anybody" behind the string of assassinations, assassination attempts, and terrorist bombings that preceded and followed the Hariri assassination. The reason was because "those behind them live between us," apparently referring to Hizballah and other pro-Syrian Lebanese actors.

133. (S) Jumblatt, Hamadeh, and Murr were also unhappy with the way Prime Minister Siniora's government had handled the recent LAF-Fatah-Intifadah clash. Murr said he doubted that the government had the political will to resolve the problem of Palestinian arms outside the camps. He noted that Siniora -- skirting the chain of command -- had called the LAF commander, General Suleiman, to order that LAF forces sent to the scene of the incident stand down.

NEED TO "ENCOURAGE" SINIORA

134. (S) Jumblatt said that Siniora was worried that any crackdown on these Palestinian rejectionist militias would expose him to accusations of persecuting the Palestinian refugee population. Siniora feared growing hostility from the refugee camps themselves. Of course, that was clearly not the case, said Jumblatt: these armed elements were not the same as noncombatant refugees living in the camps. Siniora needs to be "encouraged" to act more firmly, he said. While Sa'ad Hariri was more inclined to be firm, problems of

"communication" between him and Siniora were hindering more effective government action. "We need to work on this," Jumblatt said.

A CASE FOR HELPING THE LEBANESE
ARMY: IT'S NOT 1975 ANYMORE

¶35. (S) On the bright side, Murr insisted that the Christian-Muslim divide the led to the breakup of the LAF shortly after the beginning of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 was no longer a factor. Jumblatt pointed out that parts of the country that were once staunch centers of support for the civil war-era National Movement (the combination of leftist, Islamist, and Palestinian groups of which he and his late father, Kamal Jumblatt, were leaders, and which fought the LAF among others) were now seeing demonstrations in favor of the LAF as it attempted to hold the line against the likes of the PFLP-GC and Fatah-Intifadah.

¶36. (S) Murr added that there was no danger of foreign technical support and donated equipment being diverted from the LAF (to Hizballah, for example). Assistance that was cost-effective from the point of view of the donor -- such as the provision of used equipment -- would boost LAF morale, including among the LAF's many Shi'a members.

FELTMAN